

1998 LONG-RANGE CHAPTER TWO

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II. THE TRANSPORTATION PLANNING PROCESS

Decisions about how state and federal transportation funds are to be used on a variety of proposed rail, roadway, transit and bicycle transportation projects are made through a highly structured transportation planning process. This process corresponds to the demands of the federal government, receives input from regional entities and the public, and is coordinated and lead by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT). Described below are the elements, products and public participation components of a planning process that is designed to take long-term transportation plans and turn them into specific improvement and maintenance projects.

A. FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

Federal law and regulation dictate many facets of transportation planning including the players, the time frames and the funding. Federal funding for transportation improvements, one of ConnDOT's principal sources of capital, is dependent on periodic federal authorizations. The Intermodal Surface Transportation and Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), expired September 30, 1997, and has been superseded by the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). TEA-21 contains over 19 different funding sources with each having specific eligibility requirements, funding ratios, and other limitations. It is a comprehensive act which requires each state to develop and implement a continuing, comprehensive, and intermodal statewide planning process for surface transportation (rail, bus, and highways).

While regional involvement has been a feature of transportation planning in Connecticut since 1959, the ISTEA and now TEA-21, serve to formalize relationships and assign responsibilities among the state and Regional Planning Organizations (RPOs). RPOs consist of a number of member municipalities and are responsible for conducting planning activities for specific geographic areas within the state. They work extensively to assist municipalities with planning and administrative services, and to cope with the ever more complex municipal management and planning practices. RPOs also provide a forum for addressing intermunicipal concerns and representation in relating to State and Federal programs. The State of Connecticut has 15 RPOs which are governed by either a Regional Planning Agency (RPA), a Regional Council of Elected Officials (CEO) or a Regional Council of Governments (COG). The RPOs located in urbanized areas of more than 50,000 population have been designated by the Governor to serve as Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs). Ten of Connecticut's RPOs fall into this category. These MPOs have an explicit role in the conduct of regional planning and programming activities, as specified in the federal legislation. The TEA-21 requires them to have a continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive transportation planning process that results in plans and programs that consider all transportation modes and supports metropolitan community development and social goals. The five other RPOs, called Rural RPOs, conduct similar planning activities in cooperation with the Department. The boundaries of these RPOs are shown in FIGURE II-1.

B. PLANNING PROCESS

There are two primary transportation planning products the regional agencies are responsible for developing under ISTEA, as identified in FIGURE II-2: The Regional Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRP) and the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The LRP must ensure the existing system is being adequately operated and maintained, and expanded and improved, as appropriate, over a twenty-year time horizon. This plan must also consider the full range of modal choices (e.g., highways, transit, rail), and be "financially constrained." This means the plan must be consistent with the amount of funding that can reasonably be expected to be available. Projects from the LRP are selected by ConnDOT for inclusion in the state-mandated Master Transportation Plan. The TIP is a subset of the long-term plan which specifies the projects that will be advanced over a three-year time frame. All of the TIPs are integrated into a Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) along with projects located in the rural areas of the state.

As the figure illustrates, the LRP and the TIPs are developed by the regional organizations with input from ConnDOT and the public. Some of the information the regional entities may consider includes the condition of roads and bridges as assessed by ConnDOT, congestion management reports generated by the Department, and Major Investment Studies.

When developing the STIP and TIPs, ConnDOT prepares and distributes to each RPO a list of the projects proposed for the region. The regional agencies review the projects, consider their own needs, and provide to the Department their comments for the draft TIPs. Any disagreements are worked out between the Department and the region before the draft TIPs and statewide program are completed. Federal regulations provide that the metropolitan TIPs be included in the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program without modification. However, the TIPS must have received approval from the MPO and the Governor prior to STIP inclusion. The five Rural RPOs do not have formal approval authority for their regions' TIP under federal law. ConnDOT, however, uses essentially the same process for the rural areas to identify transportation priorities.

Once the regions have reviewed the proposed projects, the draft STIP is assembled. The draft STIP is checked for fiscal constraint, consistency with the long-range plans, and conformity to air quality plans. A conformity report is required by the federal Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 (CAAA). The Department and the MPOs cooperatively work to develop and endorse the Air Quality Conformity Statement, which demonstrates that the TIP conforms with the requirements of the CAAA. The Department gathers all regionally significant projects from the MPOs' LRP and the draft TIPs and models them. The final results of the modeling process are submitted to the MPOs for their evaluation and endorsement. The conformity statement certifies to the federal government that the projects in the STIP (and LRP) will "conform" to the State Implementation Plan (SIP). The SIP, required for "non-attainment areas" where certain types of pollutants do not meet federal standards, is a plan to reduce the emissions of volatile organic compounds, nitrogen oxides, and carbon monoxide. Most of Fairfield County is classified as a "severe non-attainment area" and the rest of the state is a "serious non-attainment area."

Figure II- 1. Boundaries of Regional Planning Organizations

Transportation Planning and Programming Process

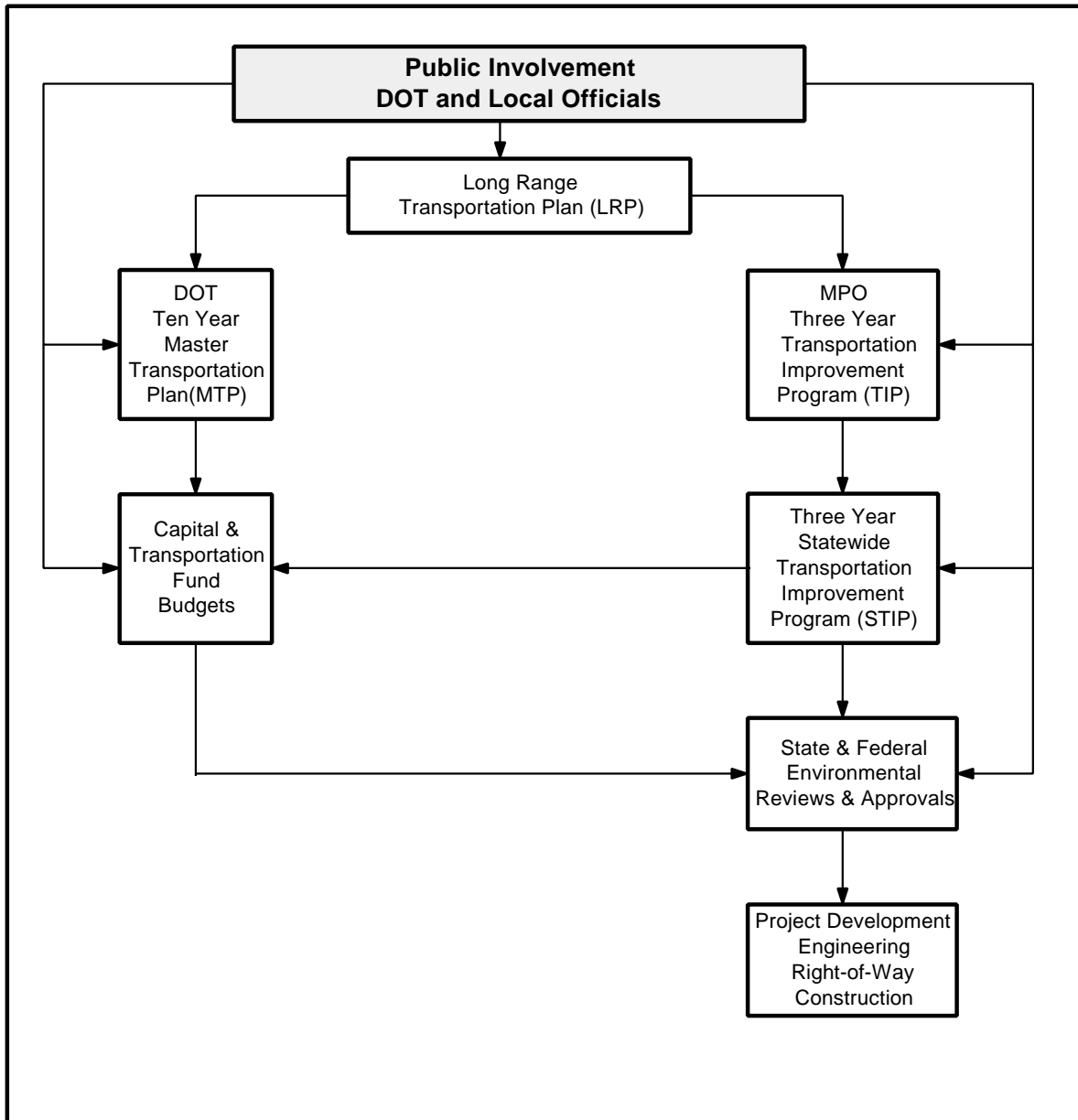


Figure II- 2. Transportation Planning and Programming Process

Both the draft TIPS and the draft STIP are made available to the public for review and comment. The RPOs address all comments provided by the public concerning the draft TIP, while ConnDOT addresses comments on the draft STIP. The draft STIP is open to public comment for a minimum of 30 days. After consideration of public comments, a final edition of the STIP is prepared and submitted to the FHWA and FTA for their approval.

In addition, the MPOs complete a Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) every state fiscal year. The UPWP is a statement of proposed work and estimated costs that document the eligible activities to be undertaken with FHWA and FTA planning funds. The UPWP discusses the planning priorities facing the metropolitan area and describes all metropolitan transportation and transportation-related air quality planning activities anticipated within the area during the fiscal year. This UPWP is developed in coordination with the Department of Transportation, FHWA and FTA.

In Connecticut, transportation planning results in at least four major overlapping documents that are created in response to different mandates. FIGURE II-2 illustrates this dynamic process from long-term planning to project development. The figure depicts the interaction between federal guidelines mandating regional input, state requirements for a long-term plan, the contribution of the state budget process, and the short-term implementation plan requiring federal approval. Of course, the figure does not fully capture the negotiation process that must occur for these plans to become reality. Brief descriptions of the resulting plans are provided below:

- **Long-Range Plans (LRPs).** The LRP is required by Title 23 United States Code (USC), Section 135 (e) as amended by TEA-21. This statewide plan is intended to present a long-term, intermodal vision of the state's transportation system over a 20-year period. It is developed by the state in cooperation with Metropolitan Planning Organizations, transit agencies and others who have an impact on the transportation system. Each of the state's ten MPOs must also submit a Regional LRP to the FHWA and FTA. These transportation plans must be reviewed and updated at least every three years to confirm their validity and consistency with current and forecasted transportation, land use conditions and trends and to extend the forecast period. In the continuing, cooperative process established under the ISTEA, the Department gives consideration to the MPOs' LRPs in developing the Statewide LRP.
- **Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).** The TIP is required by Title 23 U.S.C., Section 134 (h) as amended by TEA-21. This plan is a description of all highway and transit transportation projects in a metropolitan area that receive federal funding over a three-year period. Additionally, the TIP must include descriptions of all other regionally significant transportation projects which affect air quality, regardless of funding source. It must reflect the priorities for programming and expenditures of funds and can include only projects or identified phases of projects for which full funding can reasonably be anticipated to be available within the time period contemplated for completion of the project. A TIP is developed by the MPO in cooperation with the state and public transit operators, and is approved by each Metropolitan Planning Organization. The metropolitan plans must be included in the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), without modification, following approval by the Governor.

- **Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).** The STIP is required by Title 23 USC, Section 135(f) as amended by TEA-21. The STIP developed by the Department is the statewide counterpart to the TIP. It is a complete list and description of all FHWA/FTA funded projects and other regionally significant projects that will be undertaken within the next three years for the entire state. STIPs must be submitted at least every two years to the FHWA and the FTA for joint approval, though, amendments can be submitted at anytime.
- **Master Transportation Plan (MTP).** The MTP, while not required by federal legislation, is required by state statute (CGS Section 13b-15). This plan is intended to "provide the Administration, General Assembly, local elected officials, and members of the general public with an understanding of the projects and programs that the Department will be pursuing over the next 10 years." It contains information on major transportation-related issues and concerns, the transportation planning process, the Department's financial investment goals, major plan elements, transportation financing programmed and planned projects (highway, bus, rail, airport and waterway), and capital and operating financial data. The MTP must be submitted to the General Assembly every two years.

Prior to the development of the 1993 Master Transportation Plan, as a result of federal legislation including ISTEA and the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 and the changing state and federal financing situation, ConnDOT performed a comprehensive review of the status of the existing transportation system and the state and regional plans. From these reviews, a Strategic Financial Investment Plan emerged and was reported in the 1993 Master Transportation Plan. That plan defined the Department's goals and provides guidance in its program development.

During the process of developing the Strategic Plan it was apparent that financial resources would not be available to complete all of the regional transportation plans. Plans for major projects were reviewed, rescoped, rescheduled or removed in order to provide the maximum return on a more limited investment. The list of Major Capital Projects was then developed and has since been refined.

The principal elements of the Strategic Plan are provided in Chapter V in the "Overview of ConnDOT's Financial Investment Goals."

For planning purposes, a twenty-year allocation of expected highway funds by Connecticut planning regions was made in 1994 so that each RPO, MPO and the Department could better plan and develop fiscally constrained long-range plans. In November 1998, due to the passage of TEA-21, the twenty-year estimates were revised utilizing updated data and funding projections.

The allocation of funds was based on vehicle miles of travel, congested vehicle miles of travel and lane miles within each region, weighted for system improvement and preservation type projects. System Improvement projects are projects which enhance safety, improve mobility, increase system productivity or promote economic growth. System Preservation projects are projects such as repaving roadways, bridge repair or replacement, and any other form of reconstruction in place.

In addition to the above plans, the Department prepares a capital program as part of the normal state budget process involving the Governor and the General Assembly. ConnDOT's capital budget requests describe the Department's immediate plan for the next two-year period.

C. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The TEA-21 mandates and emphasizes public participation in the transportation planning process. It is ConnDOT's responsibility to provide government agencies, citizens, affected public agencies, private providers of transportation, and other parties (collectively identified as stakeholders) information and the opportunity to participate in the development of proposed transportation actions. The Department meets this responsibility through its "public outreach" efforts.

Public Outreach is the process implemented to inform and offer to the public the opportunity to participate in the development of a proposed transportation action. In this process the emphasis is on developing transportation decisions as a product of partners' collaborative work. It is a result of debate and choices made jointly by a variety of government and non-government parties working through an on-going, interactive process.

Public outreach programs are by necessity, strongly individualistic and tailored to local circumstances. Generalization of public outreach efforts is difficult and the development of standardized procedures is impossible. Multiple approaches may be required to elicit the involvement of different stakeholders. In public outreach efforts emphasis is placed on transportation actions which can directly affect neighborhoods and communities for the long term.

The goals of the public outreach program are as follows:

1. Provide adequate notice to the general public and targeted audiences.
2. Allow public input to take place early enough in the planning process that it can be assimilated.
3. Provide sufficient information to the public to allow their input to be informed.
4. Respond to the public's input, explaining why it was either accepted or rejected.

ConnDOT often uses public meetings to give stakeholders the opportunity to receive information regarding a program or project and to obtain information from the public regarding their concerns. Meetings provide the opportunity to present graphical displays which can be more explanatory than other media such as newsletters or newspaper advertisements. Two general types of public meetings can be used. They are the "Open" forum and the "Formal" forum.

The Open Forum Meeting (also called an “Information Meeting” or “Open House”) is an informal atmosphere, with the opportunity to attend anytime during specified time period(s). In a Formal Forum Meeting, public participation is accomplished both through a structured presentation and informally, prior to and following a presentation. The Formal meeting has a structured start time for those who wish to hear/view the presentation of information by the program or project sponsor.

In addition to formal and open forum public meetings, ConnDOT may use of a number of other public fora as part of its public outreach programs for specific projects. These can include: Charrettes, Visioning, Citizens’ Advisory Committees, Transportation Fairs/Major Special events, Focus Groups, and Collaborative Task Forces/”Blue Ribbon” Commissions.

In November 1995 ConnDOT published a “Guide For Public Outreach” (Guide). This Guide was prepared for use by ConnDOT, and is intended to provide a menu for implementing an effective process for informing the public and for community participation throughout the development of transportation actions (study, program or project), during the Planning, Facility Design/Rights-of-Way/Program Development, and Construction/Implementation/Maintenance. A copy of this Guide was sent to the 15 Regional Planning Agencies and the main public library in each town.

ISTEA and the TEA-21 also require that the metropolitan transportation planning process include a proactive public involvement process that provides complete information, timely public notice, full public access to key decisions, and supports early and continuing involvement of the public in developing plans and TIPs and meets the requirements as specified in 450.316(b). Each MPO has developed its own public involvement process consistent with the ISTEA legislation. This process was put out for public review by each of the MPOs for a 45 day comment period and subsequently endorsed.